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S E C R E T OTTAWA 000218

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TAGS: PREL MOPS NATO AF CA
SUBJECT: (S) CANADA: RE-CONSIDERING ALL OPTIONS FOR ITS
FUTURE MILITARY ROLE IN KANDAHAR?

REF: OTTAWA 196

Classified By: PolMinCouns Scott Bellard, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (S/NF) Summary: The minority government of Prime Minister Harper may not have actually ruled out extending Canada's 2,800-member military contingent, including combat forces, in Kandahar beyond 2011. If this government remains in office throughout 2010, operational requirements would force a truly final decision no later than fall 2010, but a further extension of combat forces would be a highly sensitive political football. PM Harper may be banking on President Obama's popularity here and hoping that the results of the USG's policy review on Afghanistan, new international efforts stemming from the March 31 conference on Afghanistan in the Netherlands, and the outcome of the NATO 60th anniversary summit will change Canadian domestic dynamics enough to give this government -- or even its successor -- enough new political flexibility to continue a combat role in addition to whatever reconstruction and development roles Canada will maintain after 2011. End summary.

¶2. (S/NF) At a March Cabinet 10 meeting, ministers of Prime Minister Stephen Harper's minority government apparently agreed that "all options are back on the table" with respect to Canada's military role in Afghanistan after 2011, according to Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) Afghanistan Task Force (FTAG) Senior Advisor David Fairchild (strictly protect). It will take time for the government's public rhetoric to catch up to this "new reality," however, requiring some "patience" on the part of allies, Fairchild commented privately to polmilloff on March ¶16. He urged that, for now, allies should not publicly press Canada to extend its troop deployment in Kandahar beyond ¶2011.

¶3. (S/NF) Fairchild (who will soon complete a three-year assignment in FTAG) added that his "best guess at this point" is that by 2011 Canada's Task Force Kandahar (TFK) will no longer exist. He predicted instead that TFK and its 2,800 member Canadian Forces (CF) contingent under ISAF likely will be subsumed into the fast growing U.S. command structure in RC-S. Fairchild further speculated that Canada might withdraw the CF battle group in 2011 for the one year "operational pause" that Chief of Land Forces General Leslie had envisioned in recent testimony to Parliament (reftel), while leaving about 1,800 to 2,000 troops in place to conduct the kinds of training, mentoring, enabling, and PRT force protection missions that the CF are doing at this time.

¶4. (C/NF) Operational requirements for any extension would force the government's hand no later than fall 2010, Fairchild noted. If Canada begins to withdraw its troops starting in July 2011, as currently mandated by a March 2008 House of Commons bipartisan motion, the U.S. and other ISAF partners will need at least six months to send replacements into RC-S (January-June 2011) in advance of a subsequent six

month long withdrawal or draw-down of CF (July-December 2011), he explained. Canadian and U.S. military and civilian planners will need to have a plan in place by January 1, 2011, he reasoned, in order to ensure that the necessary personnel and infrastructure are in Kandahar throughout that year.

15. (S/NF) Comment: After being explicit publicly and privately that the CF combat mission in Afghanistan would definitely end in 2011 according to the terms of the March 2008 motion, PM Harper and his Cabinet would be venturing into politically sensitive territory to try to re-sell a further extension to an increasingly dubious Canadian public. Official Opposition Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff -- who has also been firm about the 2011 deadline -- has repeatedly accused PM Harper of going back on his word or obfuscating on other issues (notably, the economic downturns and the government deficit), and a reversal of course on Afghanistan by this government would be a political goldmine for the Liberals. Given the Conservatives' minority status in the House of Commons, the likelihood is high for elections sometime over the next year (with fall 2009 a real possibility). Bad news from Kandahar and repeated deaths of Canadian troops contribute to a growing public perception that Canada has already done more than its share; there is very little public appetite for a continued combat role after 2011. PM Harper may be banking on President Obama's popularity here and hoping that the results of the USG's policy review on Afghanistan, new international efforts stemming from the March 31 conference on Afghanistan in the Netherlands, and the outcomes of the NATO 60th anniversary summit could change Canadian domestic dynamics enough to give this government -- or its successor -- enough political flexibility to enable it to continue a combat role in Afghanistan in addition to whatever reconstruction and development role Canada will maintain after 2011.

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